THE YEARS PRECEDING

2 CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

CAMBRIDGE DURING THE REVOLUTION

1

One hundred years before Cambridge became the focal point of colonial rebellion against England, her townspeople had already earned a reputation for acting independently. The Puritan founders of the town had left England to establish a "purer" church and acquire larger tracts of farmland in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Although the Colony was chartered as an English commercial venture, colonial merchants found many ways to evade Parliament's trade regulations.

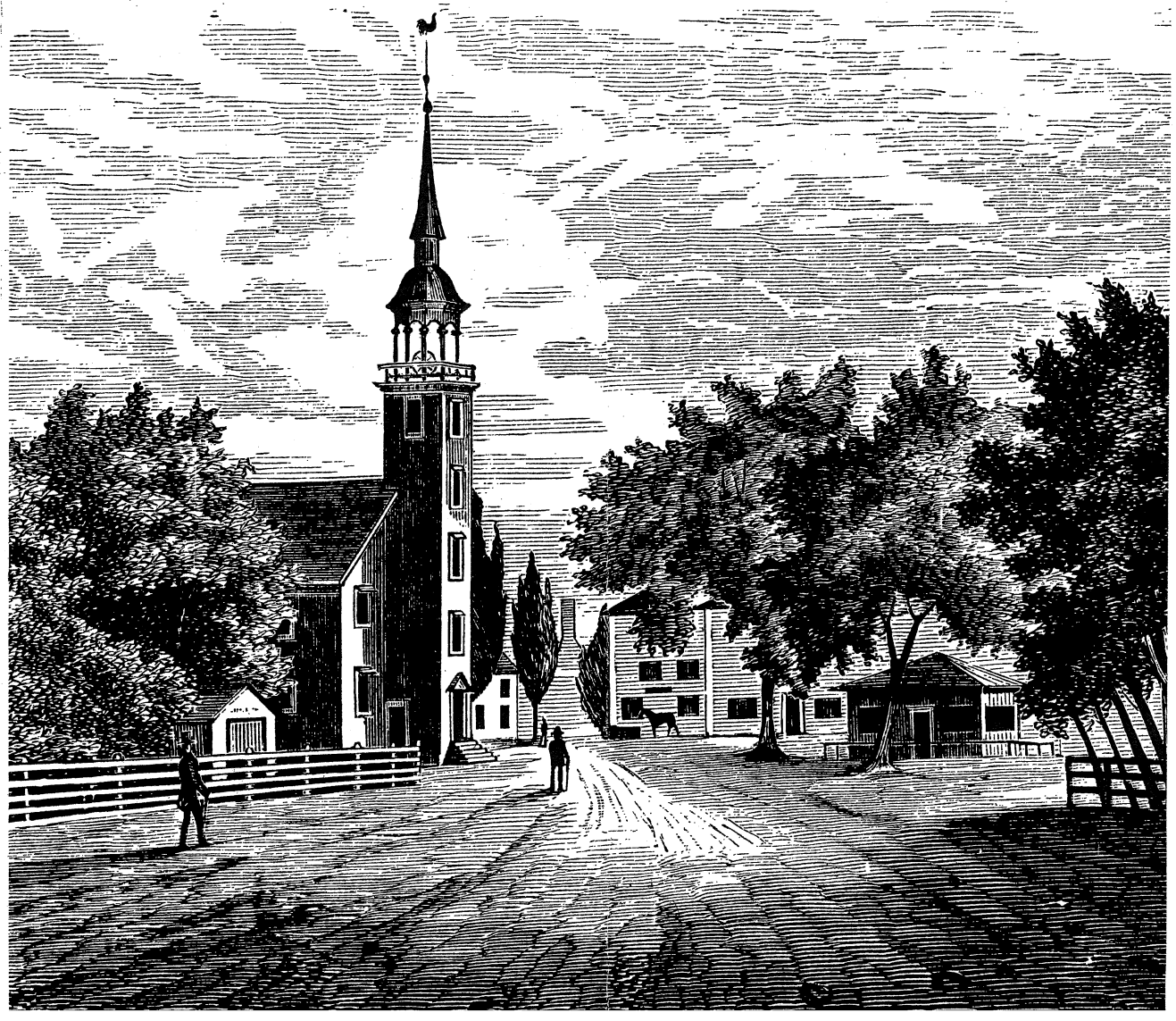
By the time of the Revolution, descendants of the Puritan settlers still constituted more than 90% of the small town's population of 1,500. Like their ancestors, these farmers and tradespeople attended congregational church services and believed firmly in their right to self-government through town meetings and elected representatives. When the political crisis arose, the Puritans became patriots.

The other 10% of the population consisted of a few closely related families who lived apart from the mainstream of village affairs. With fortunes earned from West Indian plantations, Boston shipping houses and service in the colonial administration, they built summer homes and country estates along *Brattle Street* ("*Tory Row*"), preferring rural Cambridge to the already crowded Boston. Most of the Tories remained firmly loyal to the Crown throughout the Revolutionary period.

The Tories established their own Anglican church only fifteen years before the Revolution. When *Christ Church* (1) was built in 1760, each family purchased a pew, with space to the rear of the church for servants and slaves. The first rector, East Apthorp, built an elegant mansion that outraged Puritans dubbed the "*Bishop's Palace.*" It is now *Apthorp House* at Harvard (2).

The infamous Stamp Act, passed by Parliament in 1765, gave rise to the first public protest of English colonial policy by American colonists. Both patriots and Tories objected to the cumbersome law, which required colonists to purchase a validation stamp from English authorities in order to transact the simplest business.

Voters at a 1765 town meeting agreed that the Stamp Act undermined both civil liberty and free trade. A year later it was finally repealed, but Parliament continued to impose restrictions on colonial merchants. Customs officers and royal troops were sent to Boston to enforce the new regulations.



TAKING ACTION

George Washington, after 1776, by Joseph Hiller, Sr.

Christ Church, 1792

2

In 1772, Samuel Adams urged patriots from Boston and neighboring towns to form Committees of Correspondence to coordinate the rebel cause. Cambridge appointed its own Committee of well-known farmers and selectmen.

When England levied the tea tax in November of 1773, angry Cambridge patriots resolved to "join in any measures that may be thought proper to deliver ourselves and posterity from slavery." Now they had entered the fight. A month later, on December 16, 1773, Cambridge rebels participated in the Boston Tea Party.

The British retaliated with the "Intolerable Acts", which were intended to block the rebellion. The boldest Intolerable Act replaced the colonists' self-government with a Mandamus Council made up of royal appointees. Three of these Mandamus councillors were well-known Cambridge loyalists.

During the summer, after the port of Boston had been closed to punish the rebels, tensions mounted between Cambridge loyalists and patriots. Tories such as William Brattle and Spencer Phips were now forced to abandon their estates for safer homes in Boston, Canada or England.

On the first of September, 1774, hundreds of patriots from throughout New England crowded around the *Cambridge Common* (3) to protest British confiscation of their powder supplies and the appointment of Mandamus Councillors. That evening, the mob surrounded Attorney General Jonathan Sewall's home, now at *149 Brattle St.* (4). They shattered a few windows, but made no further trouble for the Tory lawyer whose earlier suit against Richard Lechmere had begun the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts.

On the morning of September 2nd, hundreds of patriots advanced to the *Cambridge Courthouse* (5), then located in Harvard Square, where they demanded that the two Mandamus councillors present resign. The two men, Judge Samuel Danforth, who had served in elected positions for 40 years, and Judge Joseph Lee, one of the wealthy founders of Christ Church who lived at *159 Brattle St.* (6), both gave up their positions.

By that evening, the third councillor, Lt. Gov. Thomas Oliver, had also resigned. He submitted reluctantly as a mob of 4,000 patriots surrounded his home at *33 Elmwood Ave.* (7).

3

THE WAR IN CAMBRIDGE

By October of 1774, patriots had created Provincial Congresses to take over the civil and military affairs of the Colony. A Committee of Safety took charge of organizing the provincial army. Members of the military companies—every fourth man of which was expected to be ready to march at a moment's notice—were known as "Minutemen." Generals Artemas Ward and Seth Pomeroy commanded the army, whose watchwords were "Resistance to tyranny!" and "Life and liberty shall go together!"

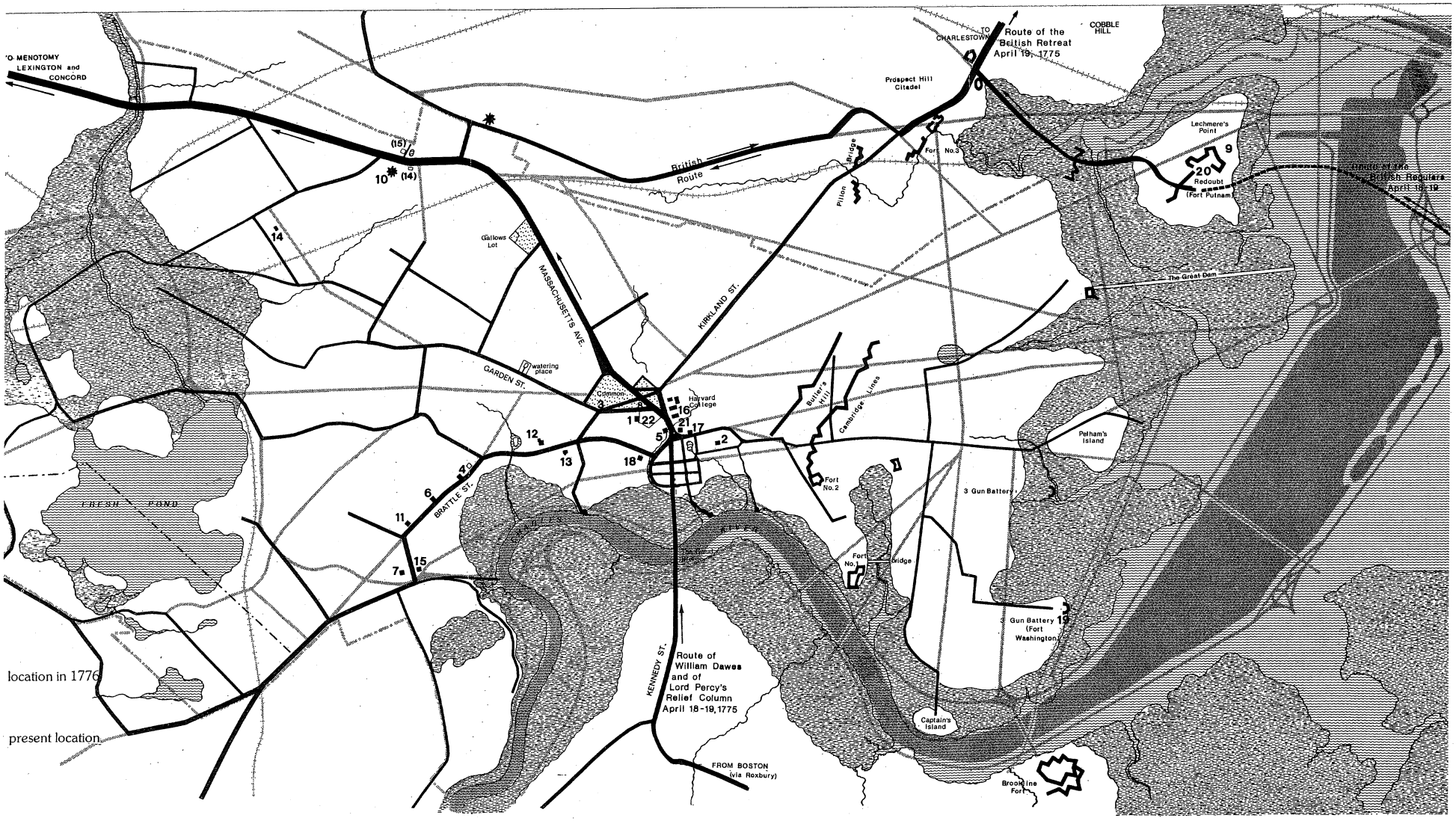
On April 18, 1775, spies discovered that the British General Gage was planning to attack provincial military stores in Concord the following morning. Paul Revere and William Dawes were quickly sent from Boston to warn the countryside. While Revere rode through Charlestown, Dawes took the longer route over Roxbury Neck to Brighton and across the "Great Bridge" (on the site of today's Larz Anderson Bridge) into Cambridge. *Brass hoofprints along Massachusetts Ave. memorialize Dawes' route past the Common* (8).

Before dawn on the 19th, the first British detachment had landed on *Lechmere Point* (9), near today's Middlesex County Courthouse. The redcoats waded through marshes and traversed what is now Somerville until they reached Beech St. near Porter Square. From there they followed what is now Massachusetts Ave. west to Lexington and Concord.

About noon on April 19th, British reinforcements led by Lord Percy marched through Cambridge. The patriots had intended to obstruct Percy's march by dismantling the Great Bridge, but the redcoats were caused little difficulty as the frugal patriots had piled the planks on the shore rather than sinking them in the river.

It is not known whether Cambridge militia were present at Lexington and Concord, but it is certain that they actively engaged British soldiers on their retreat. The redcoats suffered their greatest losses at the hands of local militia in Menotomy (now Arlington) and North Cambridge.

Three Cambridge patriots were killed in one *skirmish* that occurred near the present intersection of Massachusetts and Rindge Aves. (10). Volunteers John Hicks and Moses Richardson, both too old to enlist as militiamen, were surprised by a British flank guard as they fired on the main column from behind overturned barrels. Simple-minded William Marcy, an innocent onlooker who mistook the retreating column for a parade, was also killed.



Cambridge Historical Commission
831 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139

Written by Erica Funkhouser Beal.

Cover: Fourth Meeting House in Harvard Square, 1756-1833

4 Hospitals were set up in the homes of Thomas Fayerweather at *175 Brattle St.* (11), and John and Henry Vassall at *105 and 94 Brattle St.* (12 & 13). Wounded men were also treated at the houses of Abraham and Daniel Watson, now at *181-183 Sherman St.* (14) and *30 Elmwood Ave.* (15), but then located opposite the skirmish site.

The next day Cambridge was designated headquarters of the provincial government and army, under the command of General Artemas Ward. Tory John Borland's house (Apthorp House) served as a barracks and a meeting place for the Committee of Safety, which promptly emptied Borland's wine cellar.

Harvard College relinquished *Holden Chapel* and *Harvard Hollis*, and *Massachusetts Halls* (16) for barracks. Across the Common, Christ Church housed over 100 soldiers, who melted down the organ pipes for much-needed bullets.

The army's presence greatly affected Cambridge. Members of patriot as well as Tory families left town. "(We) are in the middle parlor with a board nailed across the door," wrote Elizabeth Murray Inman; "The women and children have all left Cambridge, so we are thought wonders."

By May, 16,000 soldiers were quartered around Cambridge. How would they be maintained? The Provincial Congress feared "having an army, although consisting of our own countrymen, established here without a civil power to provide for and control them."

In June the patriots discovered that General Gage was planning another offensive. They moved quickly to block the attack. On the evening of June 16. 1775, over 1,000 patriot soldiers, led by Colonel Prescott, paraded on Cambridge Common. After a prayer by President Langdon of Harvard, they proceeded to Charlestown, where, through the night, they fortified Breed's Hill and neighboring Bunker Hill.

At dawn the British discovered the fortifications and immediately opened fire. Their first two attacks were unsuccessful, but on the third try the redcoats finally managed to drive the weary and outnumbered patriots off the hills. Cambridge's Thomas Gardner, second in command, was killed during the patriot retreat.

The British could hardly declare Bunker Hill a victory, as over 1,000 redcoats had been killed or wounded. General Gage was immediately replaced by General Howe.

On the patriot side, a "line of circumvallation" was completed from the Mystic River to the Charles. The *fortifications (see map)* consisted of simple earthworks and trenches at Winter and Prospect Hills in what is now Somerville, around the village, and on Roxbury neck.

On July 3, 1775, General George Washington arrived in Cambridge as Commander-in-Chief of the new Continental Army. The General was quartered in Harvard's *Wadsworth House* (17), while his first aide-de-camp, Thomas Mifflin, stayed in William Brattle's house at *42 Brattle St.* (18).

5 General Washington found a "mixed Multitude" of about 14,000 soldiers in Cambridge, "under very little discipline, order, or Government." Drinking, theft, and desertion were common among the troops, who lacked every essential from jackets and flour to fuel and ammunition. One cook described typical rations: "I got fer berkfust som bef staks and for diner I got a ris puden & bef & turneps."

Washington and his staff soon moved to grander quarters in the John Vassall House, now the Longfellow National Historic Site (12), where during the long siege their more sophisticated dinners consisted of meat pies, various vegetables, and quantities of Madeira wine.

General Washington's strategy was to push provincial fortifications eastward and to tighten the blockade of Boston. First the works at Winter, Prospect, and Cobble Hills and on Roxbury Neck were improved. In the autumn, three half-moon batteries, one of which is preserved as *Fort Washington* (19), were erected. The Fort, which was given to the City as a park in 1857 and enclosed with a unique fence with cannon posts and pike and halberd pickets, is the only fortification remaining from the Siege of Boston. Work also commenced on strategic Lechmere Point, only 3/4 of a mile from enemy batteries in Boston.

In October of 1775, all of Cambridge was shocked to learn that one of General Washington's closest aides, Dr. Benjamin Church, was doubling as a British spy. The previous July, Church had been appointed to superintend the patriot hospital in Henry Vassall's house. While imprisoned in the hospital awaiting trial before the Provincial Congress, Church carved his name upon a door which still survives. Church was finally allowed to sail for England; his ship was lost at sea.

At the end of 1775, conditions in Cambridge were bleak. "We have suffered prodigiously for want of wood," wrote one general, "notwithstanding we have burnt up all the fences and cut down all the trees for a mile around the camp." Valuable orchards and shade trees had been felled for fuel. The town's beauty, recorded one traveler, "is much defaced, being now only an arsenal for military stores."

Despite prevailing apprehension, the patriots ushered in 1776 with two special events. On New Year's Eve, Christ Church was reopened for services, which George and Martha Washington attended. The following day, the flag of the Thirteen Colonies was raised for the first time on Prospect Hill.

The arrival of General Henry Knox in Cambridge on January 23, 1776, marked a turning point in the patriot offensive. Knox brought with him over 40 cannon that had been drawn through winter snows on ox-sleds all the way from Ft. Ticonderoga in New York. Now Washington had the long-range weapons necessary to force the British out of Boston.

On the night of March 4, while patriot cannon fired on Boston from *Fort Putnam* (20) in East Cambridge, the army fortified Dorchester Heights. Now the British had to move, but storms prevented their mounting an offensive.

6 On March 17, after inconclusive attempts to gain the Heights, the British were forced to abandon Boston. Along with the 10,000 redcoats sailed many Tory sympathizers who would never return, including the Lechmeres, Inmans, and Olivers of Cambridge. By early April, both the Continental Army and General Washington had moved on to New York, and Cambridge became a quiet backwater of the war.

THE YEARS FOLLOWING

In November of 1777, British and Hessian troops who had surrendered at Saratoga arrived in Cambridge as prisoners of war. Patriot Hannah Winthrop described the procession of "poor, dirty, emaciated men," and "great numbers of women (who) . . . seemed to be the beasts of burden, having bushel baskets on their backs, by which they were bent double."

For a year the prisoners remained in Cambridge. Ordinary soldiers were crowded into rickety barracks on Prospect and Winter Hills, where they had to burn the rafters to stay warm. Although the officers had been promised suitable accommodations, these were provided only reluctantly. Until he was permitted to move into the Apthorp House, the British General Burgoyne was confined to a "dirty small miserable" tavern.

One prisoner, at least, managed to enjoy her stay in Cambridge. From her "prison" at the *Lechmere-Sewall House* at *149 Brattle St.* (4), Baroness von Riedesel, wife of the German general, entertained the German officers. Her memoirs recalled the now-vanished Tory life:

> Seven families who were connected with each other, partly by family relationships and partly by affection, had here farms and gardens and magnificent houses and not far off plantations of fruits. The owners of these were in the habit of daily meeting each other in the afternoon, now at the house of one, now at another, and making themselves merry with music and dancing—living in prosperity, united and happy until, alas, this ruinous war severed them and left all their houses desolate.

In 1778 and 1779, Massachusetts delegates held the first Constitutional Convention at the *Fourth Meeting House* (21). The resulting document, the oldest constitution still in use today, was a model for the U.S. Constitution.

By 1793, when the U.S. Constitution was approved and ratified, Cambridge had returned to its small town life. Out of a population of 2,000, 450 had served in the Revolution. Many of these soldiers, including two slaves—Neptune Frost and Cato Stedman—lie in the *Old Burying Ground* (22). Salem Poor of Andover, who served as a free black while stationed in Cambridge, is buried elsewhere. The three victims of the British retreat on April 19th are also buried there, as are the Tories John Vassall and Thomas Lee.

From the initial expressions of discontent to the tragic separation of patriot and Tory families that many considered equivalent to a civil war, Cambridge had been a focal point for the early struggle for American independence.